

Baglin Testimony

Round Table Discussion: Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Criteria for Special Education Teachers

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Testimony

Good afternoon Senator Alexander and members of the Subcommittee. I welcome this opportunity to speak with you about the importance of supporting a highly qualified workforce on behalf of students with disabilities. I have been privileged to administer early intervention and special education services in Maryland since 1987, both as the State Director for Infants and Toddlers and State Director for Special Education. More importantly, I have worked in local school systems as an instructional assistant, a teacher, and a local director since 1971, and experienced the growth of this profession over these past 35 years.

The State of Maryland has required the participation of students with disabilities in our State accountability system since the early 1990s. There has been a disconnect in that special education teachers have been in many cases not able to adequately address the instructional demands related to this increased accountability, and the related requirements for access to the general education curriculum. For many years I have been an apologist for our teachers as increasingly the instructional side of education asked for content skilled special education teachers to participate in the development of content level standards and professional training opportunities.

The fact that the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in January 2002, requires that all teachers be “highly qualified” by July 1, 2006, if teaching in core academic subjects (CAS), enhances our standing as instructional professionals and members of a team that can make the difference for students with disabilities. Too long have we neglected to address meaningful grade level content by applying our unique skills in differentiating instruction for students with complex learning needs.

As you know NCLB requires that all teachers of core academic subjects be “highly qualified” by the conclusion of the 2005-2006 school year. Each school system, along with the state, must report annually the percentage of classes taught by teachers who are not “highly qualified.” Although special education is not defined in the law as a core content area, teachers of students with disabilities must be competent in the content they teach. Therefore special education teachers must meet the highly qualified teacher requirements as outlined in NCLB and incorporated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA 2004).

Maryland employs over 7,700 special education teachers to provide special education to

nearly 113,000 students, ages three to 21. Of these teachers, nearly 6200 are fully certified but we do not yet know how many are considered highly qualified as well. Statewide nearly 67% of all core academic subjects were taught by highly qualified teachers, during the 2003-2004. Maryland has taken the reporting requirements as an important component of our overall professional development approach and we believe a vigorous approach in determining how to implement this requirement will ensure a qualified workforce.

In Maryland, the largest workforce that needed immediate guidance to comply with the NCLB was comprised of special educators already serving students in Maryland's public school classrooms. To assist these teachers in achieving "highly qualified" status, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) created a single document that will give teachers the information they need to interpret the requirements of High, Objective, Uniform State, Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE); assess their credentials, course work, experience, and professional activities; complete the HOUSSE rubric to achieve "highly qualified" status; and submit their completed rubrics to human resources officials in local school systems.

For teachers who achieve "highly qualified" status as a result of holding a particular Maryland certificate in the core academic subjects they are teaching, no further action is necessary. Since special education is not a core academic subject, special educators must be highly qualified in the core content they teach.

To achieve "highly qualified" status, teachers new to the profession (without verifiable teaching experience prior to the first day of the 2002-2003 school year) may have different requirements than those who are not new teachers.

Maryland's HOUSSE requires that teachers obtain 100 points on a specially designed rubric entitled, Achieving "Highly Qualified" Status Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), A guide for Maryland Teachers, Using Maryland's HOUSSE, High, Objective, Uniform State Standards of Evaluation, March 2005.

The options for obtaining points in Maryland's HOUSSE for Special Education Teachers consist of some combination of obtaining National Board Certification in Special Education, holding a Standard Professional Certificate or Advanced Professional Certificate in combination with the following:

- Course work in core academic subject | area
- Years of satisfactory teaching experience |
- Continuing | professional development
- Activities, service, awards and presentations |

Maryland also allows teachers already holding a Standard Professional Certification to take content area tests to prove competence in CAS area.

The Maryland State Department of Education and the Maryland Higher Education Consortium are currently developing an Associates in Arts and Teaching Decree in Special Education for community colleges that would begin a path to a two year

completer program into the four year Institutions of Higher Education. This degree would provide special educators with the content work necessary to be highly qualified.

Many challenges remain to ensure a qualified teaching staff. The engagement of institutions of higher education (IHEs) in support of these efforts is critical. Without the increased engagement of these institutions in redesigning and significantly updating their programs, we cannot meet the workforce needs of special education. Also significant will be the support of local school systems in providing flexibility and funding to existing staff to obtain additional coursework and to provide the necessary incentives to increase retention within the field.

Many school systems are utilizing special education teachers to provide consultation to general education teachers to assist by providing strategies for individualizing the curriculum, behavioral interventions, modifications to materials, and implementation of accommodations. In Maryland, the most effective overall model for improvement of student achievement for special education students has been the practice of co-teaching with the general education content teacher. These models require additional time for planning and flexibility in scheduling within schools.

The benefits of a vigorous system of instructional accountability combined with a qualified workforce will ensure that students with disabilities have the opportunity to fully participate in our educational systems. The challenges of NCLB and IDEA provide opportunities for those of us who for many years have aspired to creating a robust and responsive educational environment within special education.